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"INTEGER VITAE" ONCE MORE

BY PAUL SHOREY
The University of Chicago

To engage in a set debate on the meaning of a Horatian Ode is to break the butterfly on the wheel. But Professor Hendrickson's interesting study of "Integer vitae" in the last number of this Journal raises a general question of interpretation that calls for a further word.

To me and to some other interpreters of Horace it has seemed that with due allowance for iii. 1-6 and some poems of more serious strain, the English student finds his best guide to the appreciation of the odes in the comparison with the higher and half-earnest forms of *vers de société* in which English literature is so rich. This, like other literary analogies, is a mere suggestion easily spoiled by pedantic insistence. The historic interpretation of the odes may doubtless profit by other points of view.

The education of the ancients by rhetoric left its mark on everything that they wrote. Countless topics and *motifs* are common to poetry and Epideictic prose, as has been shown at large in the dissertation of my pupil, Dr. Burgess, on *Epideictic Literature*. Many of the odes of Horace follow in whole or in part such conventional established types. Where this is the case a study of the conformity of the poem to the pattern will reveal congruities of imagery and sequences of thought where prosaic commentators found only confusion or caprice. The cavils of such critics must be answered. But in all such *Retungen* of Horace there is danger that the pendulum will swing to the other extreme, and that we may be led to take the odes too seriously. The question what is Horace's prevailing mood, or what is, in fact, the dominant *motif* or tone of a particular ode is not disposed of by showing that the poet is more or less closely and consciously copying an accepted literary pattern. In spite of this, it may still remain true that in the given case the transitions are somewhat whimsical and fantastic, that the imagery is—not parody or burlesque—but slightly touched with playful and mock-heroic

exaggeration, and that the whole is therefore a blending of jest and earnest in the sense in which this could be said of Tennyson's "Sleeping Beauty," Lovelace's "To Althea from Prison," Congreve's "Fair Amoret," Waller's or Sedley's "Chloris," Locker's "The Unrealized Ideal," and Austin Dobson's imitations.

I am still prepared to argue that such analogies, not unduly pressed, are safer guides than Professor Hendrickson's characterization of the ode in question as "a love song of close-knit sequence," or a serious lyric expression of the poet's feeling.

But first a slight personal *Rettung*. Even with the saving parenthesis "Shorey (with some restrictions)," I am unwilling to be counted as one who regards the poem as "a playful bit of burlesque or parody." In these delicate matters the *nuance* is everything, and I was careful not to use here either the word "burlesque" or the word "parody." I explicitly stated that there was "no inconsistency between the momentary flush of genuine feeling, the mock-heroic continuation, and the jesting close." I quoted Locker to the effect that "*vers de société* . . . is the poetry . . . of solemn thought which, lest it should be too solemn, plunges into laughter," and "the source" of my interpretation was the perception of this analogy and not Kiessling nor Peerlkamp nor Porphyrio.

What now are the probabilities? The first probability is that Professor Hendrickson and I, though our formulas seem to diverge, would not differ much in a full informal discussion. Though he calls the ode "a serious lyric expression of the poet's feeling," he admits that Horace here employs a "fabric of convention which cannot lightly be touched." His plea is that we do not destroy the illusion to which Horace abandoned himself. Fuscus and the city wits might smile, but Horace was enough of a poetical nature to submit himself temporarily to the spell. This differs from my "flush of genuine feeling" only in the postulate of the consistent maintenance of one high level of emotion throughout the ode. We should have to ask Horace himself whether he really thought himself in love with "Lalage," whether he found himself quite able to believe in the Red-Riding Hood wolf more terrible than the wolves of natural history, and whether in the fervor of composition he was conscious of no playful excess or incongruity in his imagery.

We cannot subpoena Horace. But the actual quality of the poem is to "absolute" literary criticism measurably independent of our conjectures as to its origin. Professor Hendrickson says that Horace was so "rapt in this vision" that he was able to compose "verses of a witchery and magic such as modern romanticism can scarcely match." Does he really think so?

I rate Horace in general and this ode in particular very highly. But it is because I believe that the best things of a kind are very good, even if the kind is an inferior one. I would maintain the distinction of kinds. The words just quoted would seem to class this ode with such things as Keats's odes, Shelley's lyrics, and the greatest of Shakespere's sonnets, while, as already indicated, I would rank it with or a little above the best things of Lovelace, Suckling, Herrick, Locker, or Dobson.

This may be thought a matter of subjective opinion. But it is surely a fact that the imagery is (1) somewhat trite and commonplace, and (2) exaggerated in a way that suggests the playful blending of jest and earnest rather than the dominating unity of intense imaginative feeling. These characteristics, not to call them defects, will not be found in passages of supreme poetical witchcraft and hardly in genuine lyrics of passionate love. The quality of the feeling is less aptly illustrated by Catullus' *Si qua recordanti* than by his *Solus in Libya Indiaque tosta Caesio veniam obvius leoni*. And though we may hope that Burns meant seriously the Horatian reminiscence in the welcome home to his wife which Professor Hendrickson quotes, the song is hardly a happy illustration either of the magic and witchcraft of high poetry or of sustained unity of passionate feeling. It begins:

O were I on Parnassus Hill
Or had of Helicon my fill,

and the stanza preceding that quoted runs:

I see thee dancing o'er the green
Thy waist sae jimp, thy limbs sae clean,
Thy tempting lips, thy roguish e'en—
By heaven and earth I love thee!

Thus far I have left out of account Professor Hendrickson's suggestion that the phrases *integer vitae* and *scelerisque purus* take

their meaning from the well-known special significations of *integer* and *scelus* in the lover's vocabulary.

Here too the difference of *nuance* is slight. For Professor Hendrickson begins by admitting that "the first line by itself might have seemed as universal a statement to a Roman reader as it has generally seemed to us," and he is willing to modify his conclusion to the result that "for Horace his single-hearted devotion to Lalage becomes . . . the type of the universal *integritas vitae*." On the other side, no one can deny that the Latin words *integer* and *scelus* may have conveyed something of the special associations with which they are potentially charged. My own *Sprachgefühl* tells me that the full solemn phrase *integer vitae* is not probably compatible with the predominance of the other association. But nothing less than a complete lexicography would embolden me to dogmatize.

The acceptance of this meaning would at the most reduce the ode to a schematic semblance of logical unity and make the transitions more obvious and explicit. That may or may not be a gain. General *integritas vitae* is quite as good a poetic ground for confidence in the divine protection as is faithfulness in love. The transition to *pone me*, etc., is quite sufficiently motivated by the seemingly incidental detail *dum meam canto Lalagen*. The more continuous and unintermittent logic won by importing the suggestion of fidelity to Lalage into the first word is not necessarily an argument in favor of the interpretation. The poetic imagination, or rather in this case, the poetic fancy, does not always work in that way. Poets do not necessarily state the *Leitmotiv* in the first word or the first verse. It is often introduced, as perhaps here, later and by a side wind in apparently casual and incidental fashion.

It is quite impossible to reduce the odes either of Horace or of Pindar to logical sequences that will satisfy the dialectic of literal-minded censors. Closer historical or literary-historical study will sometimes enable us to recover the determining links of association and exhibit something of the kind of precise logical unity which captious criticism demands. But the postulate of the necessity of such unity is often itself a mistaken concession to captious criticism. The essential unity of the highest poetry is to be sought in a certain congruity and harmony in the tone and level of feeling throughout.

That highest unity of intense imaginative feeling is hardly to be found in the majority of Horace's odes, and we should not strain interpretation to introduce it. It is well to study literary criticism and interpretation scientifically. But when we are tempted to convert it into an exact science we may recall with profit the answer which Homer gave to Lucian in the *Islands of the Blest*. To the question why he began the *Iliad* with the word *μῆνιν*, he replied that "he had no exquisite reason; it had just come into his head that way."